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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HAMBURG 000003

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/AGS
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SUBJECT: CDU'S WULFF AND THE LEFT: CLEAR WINNERS IN LOWER SAXONY ELECTIONS

REF: A. A) HAMBURG 001

- 1B. B) BERLIN 086
- 1C. C) BERLIN 0022
- 1D. D) 07 HAMBURG 065
- 1E. E) FRANKFURT 265

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The big surprise in the Lower Saxony January 27 elections was not that Minister President Christian Wulff (CDU) emerged as the big winner, nor that the SPD did poorly, but that the Left achieved 7.1 percent of the vote, thereby entering state parliament. . As expected, the CDU's numbers -- 42.5 percent -- together with the FDP, with 8.2 percent, will be able to continue their governing coalition. With his re-election, Wulff's position as deputy chairperson of the CDU on the national level has been strengthened. He has re-emerged as Chancellor Merkel's "crown prince;" and, after Hesse's Minister President Koch's poor election result, he is perhaps the most likely alternative CDU chancellor candidate. With the lowest results in Lower Saxony since 1947 at 30.3 percent, the SPD suffered a significant defeat. Coalition negotiations between the CDU and FDP are scheduled to begin early next week and are expected to go smoothly. END SUMMARY.

CDU WINS IN TRADITIONAL "RED" TERRITORY

12. (SBU) Traditionally, Lower Saxony is a Social Democratic Party (SPD) stronghold. Nevertheless, for the second election in a row under Wulff's leadership, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) has come out as the strongest party in the state. The election proved that the CDU can win elections with a seemingly unpopular reform agenda, such as reduction of benefits for the blind, administrative reforms, and even the termination of Christmas bonuses for public employees. Several factors led to the party's victory. Wulff's personal credibility and convincing and inclusive style in carrying out the reforms, as well as his party's effective means of communicating the need for reform, proved successful at the polls. In election day polls, Wulff enjoyed a 67 percent approval rating. Further, polls prior to the election indicated that the population was basically satisfied with the political situation and not pressing for change (ref A).

¶3. (SBU) The decisive election victory was not only a result of the CDU's strength, but also due to the SPD's lack of a popular frontrunner. While the SPD only dropped 3.1 percentage points compared to 2003, the party suffered its lowest post-war results in Lower Saxony, just barely breaking 30 percent of the vote. SPD main candidate Wolfgang Juettner led in the polls on "soft" political issues, but was never able to rally the necessary support despite campaigning on the minimum wage and other social issues. On January 28, State Party Chair Garrelt Duin lamented to the press that the SPD focused too much on voter groups who were also served by the Left party. In particular, both the CDU and SPD were hurt by voter turnout which was at its lowest in state elections at 57 percent since 1947.

UNEXPECTED NUMBERS FOR THE LEFT

¶4. (SBU) The CDU, SPD, Free Democratic Party (FDP), and Green representatives with whom Pol/EconOff spoke prior to the elections all grossly miscalculated the ability of the Left Party to earn sufficient votes in a rural state to enter parliament (refs A and D). The Left Party, along with the Greens and FDP, benefited from the low voter turnout, which required them to get fewer actual votes in order to overcome the five percent hurdle. Further, the SPD failed in its attempt to make the Left Party inconsequential despite moving to the left and focusing on social and "justice issues" such as the minimum wage. The Left won most of its votes from previous SPD voters, although all of the parties lost voters to them. The unemployed were the party's largest voter block at 27 percent. The Green Party also achieved their best results in Lower Saxony with 8.0 percent, up 0.4 percent from 2003.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: Compared to Koch's aggressive campaign style in Hesse (ref E), Wulff's more moderate "Merkel-like" approach proved successful in attracting strong support in a largely agricultural state. Further, the lack of engaging election issues confirmed his personal popularity among all types of voters. The Left Party's success in both Lower Saxony and Hesse gives them strong momentum for the February 24 elections

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in Hamburg, where they are already polling at six percent. With these elections, they have established themselves solidly as a political force in the former Western "Laender" with which the SPD will have to continue to contend. END COMMENT.

¶6. (U) This message has been coordinated with Embassy Berlin.
JOHNSON